

South Africa's May Day



The Working-Class Heart of Our History

A resource-book for educators

Introduction

Local organisation comes first and it leads to organisation at the national scale. Nationalism is the building block of Internationalism. May the first is the International Workers Day. This year, we are proud to celebrate the South African May Day, because the story of May Day forms a central part of South African history.

May Day, 1950, is at the heart of the South African liberation struggle. We intend to honour the central place of the working class in the South African liberation struggle, and its consequently central place in the national democratic revolutionary alliance that continues our liberation struggle, which is not yet over.

This resource booklet will show that the history, and the personalities that carried forward the history of the liberation movement, have their centre of gravity in the organised working class; and that the tragic but heroic events of May Day 1950 stand as a historic sacrament, whereby the three principal components of our Alliance were permanently joined together. The unity forged on that day has been our strength. It will continue to be our strength.

The Distant Clap of Thunder

“No Labour Movement without the Black Proletariat: The whole of the working class, white and black, [can] march unitedly forward to their common emancipation from wage slavery.”

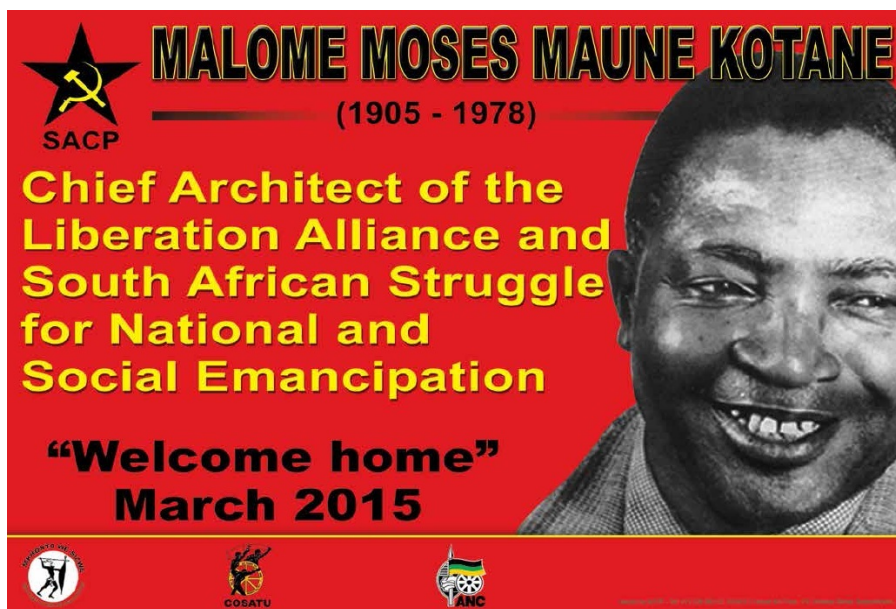
With these words the International Socialist League, our early anti-Imperialist vanguard party of the working class and fore-runner of the Communist Party, raised the banner of non-racial trade unionism in South Africa.

Two years later, in 1919, the mighty ICU (Industrial and Commercial Workers Union) was formed by Clements Kadalie. It grew over the next few years into the largest secular mass organisation the country had ever seen.

Two years later again, in 1921, the non-racial Communist Party of South Africa was formally admitted to the Communist International in Revolutionary Russia. It soon adopted the Black Republic Thesis, thereby becoming the first party in South Africa to call for black majority rule in the country.

The ICU was destroyed when its leadership was persuaded to expel the communists. It fell victim to corruption and splits and by the early 1930s it was effectively dead.

The fall of the ICU is a warning to us today. Sectarian anti-communism, open or disguised, is a poison to the organised working class.

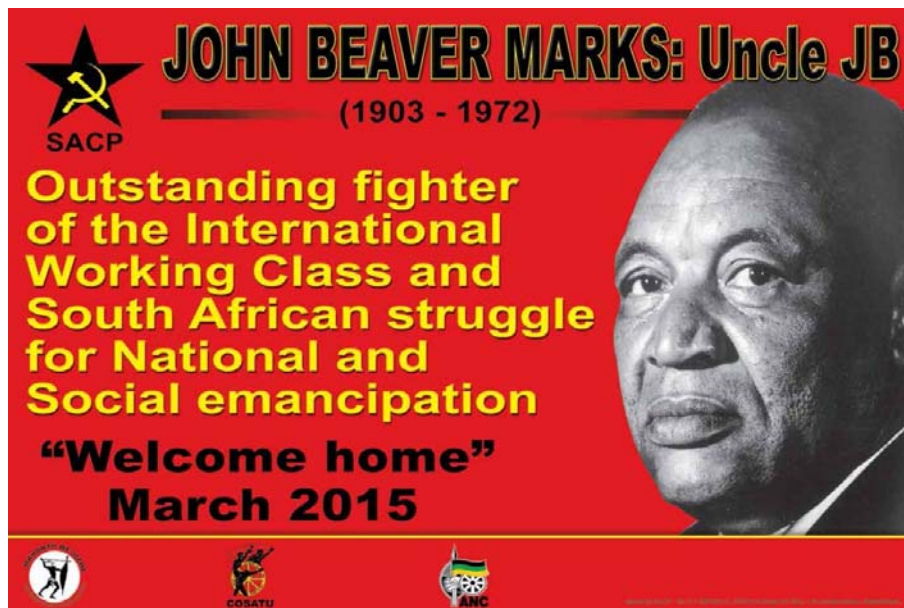


SACP poster for Moses Kotane

In the late 1920s, Moses Maune Kotane and John Beaver Marks joined the Communist Party of South Africa. Both of them joined the African National Congress, as well. Moses Kotane became the General Secretary of the vanguard party of the

working class in 1939. Two years later, in 1941, in a meeting of the Transvaal ANC, a union was planned and set up which was to be led by J B Marks.

Marks went on to lead the historic African Mineworkers Strike of 1946 – the “Distant Clap of Thunder” that heralded the arrival of the real, and eventually victorious, organised mass movement for liberation in South Africa. It is appropriate to remember, this year, that as the the SACP’s document records: *“most [of the heroic 1946 strikers] were not South Africans but Mozambicans, Tanganyikans, Angolans, Nyasas, recruited from afar, or Basotho, Bechuana or Swazis recruited from what were then still ‘British Protectorates.’”*



SACP poster for J B Marks

Kotane led the CPSA, and then the SACP, for nearly four decades until his death. Both Kotane and Marks held high offices of leadership in the African National Congress at various times throughout their political lives.

The Republic of South Africa’s profile of J B Marks, published earlier this year on the occasion of the repatriation and reburial of his remains in South Africa, records part of his contribution thus:

“Notably, the 1 May 1950 strike which brought the country to a halt and the June 26 strike in the same year in protest against the shooting of strikers on 1 May. It was a turning point and a great landmark in the long history of the struggle of the people of South Africa against racial persecution and for full trade union rights.”

It is this turning point that we are celebrating on the 1st of May 2015 as the South African May Day, because as much as was the Congress of the People, and the Freedom Charter, that were some of the later consequences of what happened on that day in 1950, this was the founding moment of our victory.

A great landmark

It is easy to forget that the African Mineworkers Strike of 1946 was crushed by the Smuts government of the day, and that this was the same Smuts who had been responsible for the terrible Bulhoek massacre and for many other atrocities.

The Smuts regime was a racist regime of brutality and cruelty. The National Party government that followed it, in 1948 –which invented the word “apartheid” – was different in degree, but it was not in kind. The compound labour system was already in place. The deprivation of the majority of the population of most of the country’s land, had already happened. And so on.

What was the purpose of apartheid? To create more severe pass laws, which were anti-working-class-laws. They were as much about labour, as they were about race. They were about the control of racialised labour. They were about the racialisation of labour, for purposes of control. The National and Class Questions are inseparable.

Here we may reflect upon the general interrelated of the struggles against racial, class and gender oppression. Undoubtedly, none of these problems will be relieved, until all of them have been resolved, together. This theory is born out in practice.

The Women’s Federation launched in 1954 adopted The Women’s Charter which preceded the Freedom Charter of 1955. It organised the historic Women’s March of 1956. Working-class women from the organised labour movement were its backbone. For example: Josie Mphama, Hettie September and Ray Alexander. Women’s struggle was and remains rooted in a practical way in the Labour movement. The on goingl working-class history of struggle from the 1950s up to the present time must be read with the history of women’s struggle in mind.

In 1949 the ANC was busy organising, the new ANC Youth League was producing its Programme of Action, and Dr Moroka was replacing Dr Xuma as President of the ANC. The National Party government was quickly passing laws in Parliament that were directed against the main defender of the working class, the communist party.



In the process of legislating against the existence of a political party, the National Party was consciously building the instruments by which it could attack any and all organisations of the popular masses, whether expressly communist or not.

In these circumstances, the liberation movement as a whole saw that the attack on the communists was an attack on the entire movement. In 1947, the non-communist Dr Xuma had already sat down with Dr Naicker and with the communist Dr Dadoo to sign the “Doctors’ Pact” of alliance between the ANC and the two Indian Congresses.

As the time approached, they could all see that the Suppression of Communism Act that would come into force in mid-1950 would menace all of them and they determined themselves to act together.

The book “A Distant Clap of Thunder says: *“the militants of the ANC youth league formed a natural working partnership with the militant veterans of an earlier period, particularly the communists like Radebe, Kotane, Mofutsanyana and Marks, who were already in the leadership ranks.”*

The “militants of the Youth League” were the likes of Mandela, Sisulu, Lembede and Tambo.



Govan Mbeki, 1910 - 2001

Govan Mbeki later wrote:

“Typical of a regime inspired by fascist ideas and practices, the government opened its programme of trampling human rights underfoot by passing the Suppression of Communism Act in 1950. The Act, which was purportedly

*intended to crush Communism, carried clauses of a sweeping nature that destroyed everybody's right to free association and expression. **It was the realisation of this fact which induced the ANC to share the platform jointly with the Communist Party on May Day 1950 to protest against the Suppression of Communism Bill, which parliament duly passed into law. During the course of protests in various parts of the Reef, the police killed eighteen Africans and wounded many others.***

Michael Harmel ("A Lerumo") wrote:

"...a massive 'Defend Free Speech' Convention was called in Johannesburg in March [1950] by the ANC (Transvaal) the Transvaal Indian Congress, the African People's Organisation and the Johannesburg District of the Communist Party. Under the chairmanship of Dr. Moroka the conference adopted a militant series of demands for freedom of speech, movement and organisation, for land and the ending of colour bars. It issued a call for a general strike on the first of May."

The Stayaway Tactic

The 1946 Mineworkers strike taught the movement that masses of workers out in the open could be cut down, killed, wounded and dispersed by the armed forces of the regime. In response they invented the tactic of the stayaway, whereby workers, instead of picketing and demonstrating, would stay indoors at home.

This tactic, designed to minimise casualties, was used later, again and again, but as we shall see, on the first occasion that it was used – 1 May 1950 – it was not a full success from this point of view.

"Defend Free Speech" Day of May 1st, 1950 led to June 26th – "Freedom Day" – which became the occasion of the passing of the Freedom Charter.

"Defend Free Speech" was in practice and in the first place, defence of the Communist Party, which the Party can never forget and does not forget. On that day, the ANC defended the rights of the vanguard party of the working class.



The May Day Massacre: South Africa, 1950

“A Lerumo” continues:

“It will always be to the credit of the African National Congress that when the first major onslaught was launched to illegalise the Party of the working class, it did not stand aside but courageously took the lead and threw all its resources into the fight for the legal existence of the Communist Party.

“...the strike was an outstanding success. Virtually all industry on the Witwatersrand came to a stop; hardly a dark-skinned face was to be seen in the streets of Johannesburg, Springs, Randfontein and other Reef towns.

“The police had banned all meetings and gatherings on the day; and for the most part the non-white public remained quietly in their homes, following the call of the leadership to do so. But in the evening the trigger-happy police opened fire on small groups of young Africans in Alexandra Township and elsewhere. Eighteen were killed and over thirty wounded. A wave of anger and indignation spread throughout the country.”

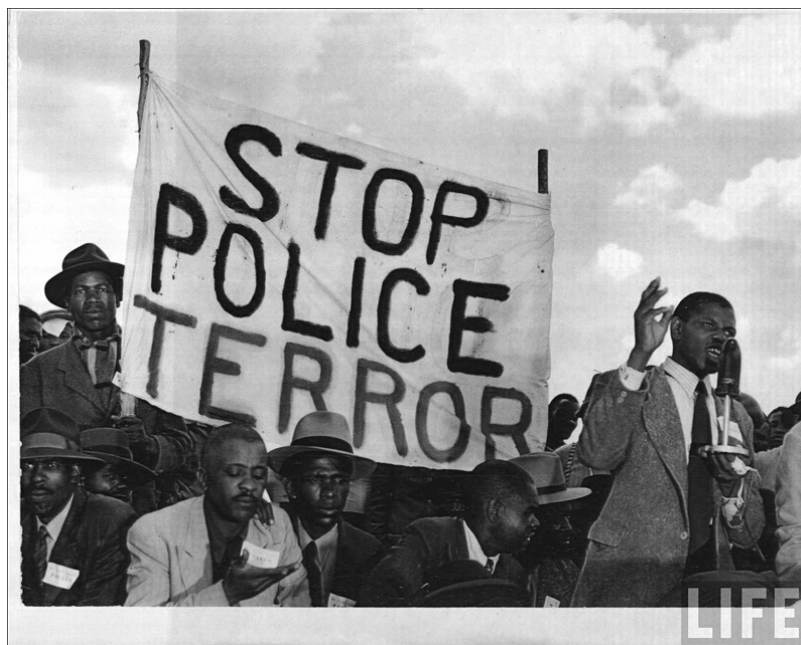


“Bantu World” of 6 May 1950

The Bantu World, a voice of the bourgeoisie, of 6 May 1950 said:

“Disregarding warnings repeated several times last week by African leaders, police officials, Ministers of the Crown and the press, Africans in several Reef centres bent on “Freedom Day” celebrations on Monday, May 1, landed themselves in trouble by their action. Thirty-eight sustained injury and eighteen died. Areas particularly affected were Brakpan and Benoni on the East Rand, Sophiatown and Newclare in the Johannesburg western zone, as well as the Orlando area.

*“Among those who died on Monday are the following from Alexandra Township: **Hilaria Zulu** (17 years). He was returning from a shop when he met his death; **David Crooke** (54) killed returning from work; **Mandlenkosi Lukele** (15) shot dead; **Koos Rabie** (49) killed while returning from work; an unknown adult and two children. Also dead are one male and female adults suffocated at the Plaza Cinema which had been set on fire by rioters.*



“Communist meeting, Johannesburg, South Africa, 1950.”

[Margaret Bourke-White, Life Magazine](#)

*“Among the injured at Alexandra Township are **Michael Dlamini** (24) shot through the thigh; **Oscar Mashigo**, a school child aged 10; **Luca Mathibe**, (54), who sustained head injuries, **Jantjie Malaba** (35) and **Maduti** aged about 30; **Samuel Modiba** injuries on the left shoulder blade; **John** (26) with abdominal wounds; an unknown boy of 12 suffering from multiple head injuries; two unknown men picked up by ambulance on their way home from work. All the injured were admitted at Baragwanath Hospital.”*

These are some of the martyrs of South Africa’s May Day.

Freedom Day, Defiance, SACTU and the Freedom Charter

“After the May Day killings, the National Executive Committee of the ANC held a series of meetings to discuss and decide on the form protest would take against the brutal murder of defenceless workers. The NEC called for a stay-at-home for 26 June 1950. After the 26 June 1951 observance of Freedom Day, it was recommended that a campaign be launched jointly by Africans in the ANC, together with Coloureds in the South African Coloured People’s Organisation and Indians in the Indian Congress. Consequently a Joint Planning Council, consisting of Dr J. S. Moroka, Walter Sisulu (President-General and Secretary-General respectively of the ANC), J. B. Marks of the ANC, and Dr Yusuf Dadoo and Yusuf Cachalia of the Indian Congress, recommended that a Defiance Campaign be launched against unjust laws on 26 June 1952.”

Govan Mbeki, *The Struggle for Liberation in South Africa*, 1992

“As soon as the terms of the Unlawful Organisations Bill became known in May 1950, the National Executive Committee of the ANC called an emergency conference in Johannesburg.

“Dr. Dadoo, for the SA Indian Congress, made an impassioned speech calling for the setting aside of past differences and the establishment of unity against fascism and for freedom. Nelson Mandela, O. R. Tambo, W. Sisulu and other leaders of the Youth League, now on the NEC of the ANC, responded in like spirit. If the attack on the Communist Party, said Tambo, were allowed to pass without resistance, none of the democratic organisations would be spared. ‘Today it is the Communist Party,’ he declared. ‘Tomorrow it will be our trade unions, our Indian Congress, our APO, our African National Congress.’

“The conference resolved on mass action, in protest against the law to suppress the Communist Party and other undemocratic measures. 26 June 1950 was set aside as a day of mourning for those killed by the police on 1 May, a day of nationwide strikes and protests. A joint committee was established to implement the decision.

“The campaign that followed, and the massive response from all parts of the country, marked a milestone in the development of the unity in action of the national liberation movements of the oppressed peoples, together with the revolutionary working class movement, the ‘Congress Alliance’.”

The concept of June 26 as Freedom Day was born in 1950. It was to become a rallying day for the forces of freedom in the years that followed, years in which the Communists, at every level of the movement, set a standard of loyalty, courage and devotion which cemented the unity of liberation and working class forces in common struggle and sacrifice.

"A Lerumo", Fifty Fighting Years

O R Tambo in 1968: "Courage rising with danger"

"Chief Luthuli has told us over the course of his leadership over us, that what we need is courage that rises with danger. The Nationalist Party of South Africa, which came into power twenty years ago, came with a violence and viciousness that was new in many respects. We confronted them with a nonviolent approach to the struggle. They killed freely, and Chief Luthuli led us, the African National Congress led the people, and now this nonviolent approach became a militant form of struggle and we launched more campaigns. The more killings there were, the more pressure there was. This was courage rising with danger. When the killing took place in 1950 on a fairly massive scale, we decided to demonstrate against this, to intensify the struggle against apartheid pressure, a national stay-at-home on June 26, 1950. This was June 26th.

"Since then, June 26th has been the centre, the peg on which we have hung many a campaign against racism in South Africa. It has come to symbolise the determination of our people to fight harder, the more severe and brutal the oppression." (Speech to United Nations Special Committee Against Apartheid, Stockholm, Sweden, 18 June 1968).



O.R. Tambo, 1917-1993

The African Mineworkers Union and its federation, the CNETU, had not survived the 1946 strike. Now it was necessary to set up, for the first time, a national, non-racial trade union federation. This was SACTU, of which the COSATU of today is a direct descendent. It came into being in March, 1950 and it was present at the Congress of the People. SACTU is one of the signatories of the Freedom Charter adopted in 1955, three months after SACTU's formation.



SACTU logo

The **Freedom Charter** was passed at the Congress of the People on June 26, 1955



Courage Rising With Danger

Marches, Strikes - Cato Manor, Sharpeville Umkhonto we Sizwe

"The brave miners of 1946 gave birth to the ANC Youth League's Programme of Action adopted in 1949; they were the forerunners of the freedom strikers of May 1, 1950, against the Suppression of Communism Act, and the tens of thousands who joined the 26 June nation-wide protest strike that followed the killing of sixteen people during the May Day strike. They gave the impetus for the 1952 Campaign of Defiance of Unjust Laws when thousands of African, Indian and Coloured people went to jail; they inspired the mood that led to the upsurge in 1960 and to the emergence of Umkhonto we Sizwe (Spear of the Nation) - the military wing of the African National Congress."

The African Miners' Strike of 1946, M P Naicker, 1976

The decade of the 1950s began with the freedom of speech campaign, leading to the first death-defying Stayaway on 1st May, 1950, allied in defence of the Party of the working class, and the first brave Freedom Day on 26th June 1950.

This is why we always celebrate May Day, as the organised working class, together with our friends and allies, the ANC. Because it is we, or at least it is our organised working-class forbears, who initiated this struggle. This is what the oppositionists do not understand.

It was for the workers that the Freedom struggle began, and it was by the workers' strength, with that of our beloved allies who stood with us and marched with us, that we were able to achieve victory, as far as we have done so. And so long as we are allied, we will continue to be victorious.



Kotane, Mandela, Treason Trial, 1956



Women's March, Union Buildings, August 9th, 1956

The decade reached its most perfect expression, in words, at its mid-point in 1955, with the Freedom Charter, passed at the Congress of the People, on June 26th, with the support of SACTU, COSATU's predecessor. The Freedom Charter is the child of the working class, and it is the fruit of our unity in the Congress Alliance. We cannot abandon the Charter, or the Alliance.



Alexandra Bus Boycott, 1957

The decade of the 1950s was the last decade of legal struggle before the 30-year banning of the liberation movement, the ANC. It proceeded through the Treason Trial – which was a consequence of the Congress of the People and of the Freedom Charter – into a time of very tense confrontation with the regime, up to the split of the PAC, and the disaster that this split caused, the catastrophe of Sharpeville.



Stay-At-Home, 1958

After Sharpeville came the founding of Umkhonto we Sizwe and the initiation of the heroic armed struggle. Many of the early MK recruits were trade unionists. The struggle is a continuity, but it is rooted in the working class action of the 1940s, and especially in the unity-in-action of May Day 1950, when working-class blood was shed on the streets of Alexandra township, and other places. This is what we honour and celebrate on May Day.

The struggle continued. Its character was confirmed in the Morogoro Conference of the ANC in 1950. Its international working-class character was confirmed by proletarian internationalism, all over the world. Mass action, inside the country, continued in the 1970s – working-class mass action, leading eventually to the formation of COSATU in 1985, thirty years ago.



Cato Manor, 1959

COSATU was formed in recognition of the indivisible nature of the struggle as between its class question, and its national question. We say that the one will not be solved until the other one is solved and now we add the question of gender, which can also only be solved simultaneously with the other two.

Thus it is that the success of the entire struggle has rested upon unity, especially between its national and its class components. Anyone who fails to understand this, and who seeks to set the allies against each other, is worse than foolish, but is a danger to all.



May Day and COSATU

When COSATU was formed in December 1985 it demanded that May Day 1986 be recognised as a public holiday, Workers Day, and called for a stay-away.

COSATU was supported by various organisations including the National Education Crisis Committee (NECC) and the United Democratic Front (UDF), the African Teachers Association, the National African Chamber of Commerce (NAFCOC), and the Steel and Engineering Industries Federation of South Africa (SEIFSA), the metal industry employers' organisation.

More than 1,5-million workers observed COSATU's call, joined by thousands of school pupils, students, taxi drivers, hawkers, shopkeepers, domestic workers, self-employed and unemployed people. Rallies were held in all the major cities. The majority of South Africa's workers had unilaterally declared the day a public holiday. Employers began to declare 1 May and 16 June as paid holidays from then on.

COSATU sustained this demand until 1994 when May Day was for the first time, immediately following the first universal-franchise election, acknowledged as a Public Holiday. It has been an official annual Public Holiday ever since. It enjoys financial support from the state for our rallies. Events are held in all provinces. Speakers from the SACP and the ANC are, and have always been, participants in these events.

We have not always managed to fully connect our celebrations with the great South African May Day Stayaway of 1950. This year we do so.



Elijah Barayi, 1930-1994

MAY DAY



COSATU

Rally

**KWA-ZULU
NATAL**

**Curries Fountain Stadium
1 May 2015 - 09h00**

Speakers:

COSATU - Sidumo Dlamini (President)

SACP - Blade Nzimande (Gen. Secretary)

ANC - Jacob Zuma (President)



**Celebrating 30th Anniversary and
repositioning COSATU towards
radical economic transformation**



National May Day Rally, KZN, 2015